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**Margaret M. Condon and Evan T. Jones (eds.), ‘The grant of a pension of £20 per year to John Cabot, 13 December 1497’ (University of Bristol, ROSE, 2011)<sup>1</sup>**

On 6 August 1497 John Cabot returned to Bristol following his famous voyage of discovery to North America. His initial reward was a gift of £10 given him by the king on 10 August, which was followed by a further payment on 26 September.<sup>2</sup> Then, on 13 December 1497, Henry VII expressed his gratitude in more substantial form, by granting the explorer a pension of £20 per annum, payable at the king’s pleasure.<sup>3</sup> This was presumably intended both as a reward to Cabot for his past actions and to provide him with a degree of financial security, so that he could support himself and his family while conducting further expeditions.<sup>4</sup>

The ‘privy seal’ warrant to authorise the grant of a pension to John Cabot was first published by Charles Deane in 1884 and has been reproduced many times since.<sup>5</sup> The standard text is that of James Williamson, who repeats the transcript published by Henry Biggar.<sup>6</sup> However, the document itself has never been examined in detail, with historians generally being content to consider it merely as an example of the way in which Cabot was treated and supported by the king after the return of the 1497 voyage. The purpose of the following paragraphs is to consider how the document was generated and to conduct a close reading of the text, with the aim of casting further light on Cabot’s treatment and the processes to which he was subject. This discussion is followed by an annotated transcription of the document, which corrects a number of minor errors found in the Biggar / Williamson version of the text. A photograph of the original manuscript is also included.

On 22 November 1497 Henry VII returned to the palace of Westminster after spending nearly two months in the west and south of England in the wake of rebellion and invasion by

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<sup>1</sup> The National Archives: Public Record Office, UK [TNA:PRO], C82/171, under date of 13 December. The following conventions were employed when transcribing the document: the line spacing, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation follow the manuscript; reconstructions of suspensions are in italics; ‘u’ and ‘v’ have been rendered according to the document rather than to modern usage. Squared brackets indicate editorial additions. As with other documents of the same type, the letter has been damaged: initially both by the physical act of filing and by being sealed ‘close’. Some further minor damage has occurred over time. As was the convention for privy seals the document was written on parchment. The reverse of the document is blank, but the original fold marks, and the outline of the perimeter of the seal, are both obvious. This transcription was undertaken as part of the ‘Cabot Project’ (University of Bristol, 2009-) funded by the British Academy (SG100194) and Gretchen Bauta, a private Canadian benefactor. We would like to thank Jeff Reed and Heather Dalton for commenting on earlier versions of this transcription.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Williamson, *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII* (Hakluyt Society, Second Series, vol. 120, CUP, 1962), pp. 84, 214; E. T. Jones, ‘Bristol, Cabot and the New Found Land, 1496-1500’ in P. E. Pope and S. Lewis-Simpson (eds.), *Exploring New World Transitions: from Seasonal Presence to Permanent Settlement* (Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology, special publications. Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, forthcoming, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> By way of comparison, this was half the £40 p.a. allowed to a knight for the king’s body, but a third more than the annuity John Carre received as a gentleman usher of the chamber, likewise paid from the Bristol customs. It was more than twice the 6d per day given to the Bristol searcher, John Whittington, as a yeoman of the Crown: *Cal. Patent Rolls 1485-1494*, pp. 336, 419, 450; *Cal. Patent Rolls 1494-1509*, pp. 14, 74.

<sup>4</sup> Cabot’s wife and three sons are recorded as being in Bristol by August 1497: Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p. 208.

<sup>5</sup> C. Deane, ‘The voyages of the Cabots’ in J. Winsor (ed.), *Narrative and Critical History of America*, vol. 3 (Boston, 1884), p. 56. Deane worked from a transcript given him by Professor Franklin B. Dexter of Yale University.

<sup>6</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p. 217; H. P. Biggar, *The Precursors of Jacques Cartier, 1497-1534* (Ottawa, 1911), p.16. The Latin subscription is transcribed by Biggar but not repeated by Williamson, who provides only a very loose summary of the subscription. The quincentenary document collection by Manuel Ballasteros Gaiboris, *Juan Caboto* (Serie Cuadernos Columbinos, vol. 21, Valladolid, 1997), merely republished Williamson’s texts when it came to the English documents included in the volume.

the pretender Perkin Warbeck, who had landed near Lands End on 7 September 1497.<sup>7</sup> The king's absence, essentially on a war footing, meant that much normal business was interrupted until the end of November, and very little by way of grants of grace passed the seals in the interim. This crisis almost certainly explains the delay between the initial reward to Cabot and the granting of his pension. After the king returned to London, he remained at Westminster until 17-18 December, before removing a few miles upriver to the royal manor of Sheen, near Richmond. There he spent Christmas and the New Year at a favourite residence, returning to Westminster only on 23 January 1498.<sup>8</sup>

The formal process of granting a pension to Cabot began on 13 December 1497 with the issuance of a signet letter by the king.<sup>9</sup> That the process commenced with a signet letter makes it highly likely that the award followed closely on one or more personal interviews between John Cabot and Henry VII.<sup>10</sup> In accordance with the bureaucratic procedures of the time, the letter would have been delivered into the privy seal office, which by the late-fifteenth century had become one of the great departments of state.<sup>11</sup> From there a further warrant was needed to 'move' the 'great seal': that is, to authorise the issue of the letters patent that would give legal substance to the king's grant. The document transcribed here is this warrant. As such it would almost certainly have been drawn up later than the original letter. Conventional office practice dictated, however, that the dating clause of the letter issued under the privy seal repeated the date and place recorded on the signet letter.<sup>12</sup> This means that, whatever its true date, the privy seal warrant should preserve the date, as well as the substance, of the king's grant.

The privy seal warrant was thus an interim stage in drawing up a formal record of the king's grant.<sup>13</sup> Its subscription, written in Latin at the top of the document, shows that it was delivered into chancery on 28 January 1498, quite possibly by Cabot himself, for letters patent to be drawn up under the great seal. Chancery practice meant that 28 January would also be the date given in the 'teste' or witness clause of the letters once drawn up, even if there were a delay in writing and sealing.<sup>14</sup> That the letters patent *were* issued is apparent

<sup>7</sup> For Warbeck, see: I. Arthurson, *The Perkin Warbeck Conspiracy 1491-1499* (Stroud, 1994), esp. pp. 182-196.

<sup>8</sup> M. M. Condon, 'The itinerary of Henry VII' (unpublished MS).

<sup>9</sup> The letter itself has long since been lost, possibly as the result of a major fire in Whitehall in 1619, which, it is thought, may account for the loss of so many of the records of the medieval privy seal office. That a signet letter was issued is recorded in a supplementary privy seal warrant of 22 February 1498: Margaret M. Condon and Evan T. Jones (eds.), 'Warrant for the payment of John Cabot's pension, 22 February 1498' (University of Bristol, ROSE, 2011). The significance of the pension grant being initiated as a result of a signet letter does not seem to have been noted before.

<sup>10</sup> Even though the signet office was, in part, becoming normalised as another department of state, letters under the signet, often reinforced by the king's sign manual, remained the most direct expression of his will: TNA:PRO, PSO2/3, *passim*; T. Westerveldt, 'Warrants under the Signet in the reign of Edward IV', *Historical Research*, vol. 83 (2010), pp. 608-13.

<sup>11</sup> For the most recent discussion of the bureaucratic process from signet office to privy seal office, and the role of the signet and the sign manual, see: Westerveldt, 'Warrants under the Signet', pp. 602-16.

<sup>12</sup> This can be cross-checked where both the initiating warrant under the signet or sign manual and the resulting privy seal addressed to the chancellor survive. A comparison of five files of chancery warrants 1489-93, with their privy seal counterparts illustrates the general correspondence of place and date: TNA:PRO, PSO2/3; C 82/61, C82/64, C82/103-104, C 82/107. The only exceptions found were two warrants of December 1489 where the privy seals were dated respectively one and three days after the date given on the signet letter: PSO2/3, C 82/61. The choice of dates was constrained by the very poor survival of privy seal files after the first two years of the reign.

<sup>13</sup> The classic account of the passage of the king's grants from the initial grant to formal engrossment (writing) under the great seal is H. Jenkinson, *The Great Seal* (London, 1927). See also Westerveldt, 'Warrants under the Signet', pp. 602-16.

<sup>14</sup> This practice was regularised following an act of 1439, 18 Hen. VI c.1: Jenkinson, *The Great Seal*, pp. 258-60; *The Statutes of the Realm*, A. Luders et al. (eds.), (11 vols, 1810-28), vol. 2, p. 301.

from an account of the Bristol customers of 1498, which records the payment to Cabot of a half-yearly instalment of £10, making direct reference to the letters patent.<sup>15</sup> The grant to John Cabot seems, however, not to have been enrolled on the patent rolls of chancery, which have no record of it. Enrolment was an option, and required payment from the beneficiary. It provided a record copy and thus security should the original patent, with its pendant great seal, be lost or challenged. Enrolment was not, however, obligatory,<sup>16</sup> and it seems to have been an option that Cabot did not pursue.<sup>17</sup> The lack of either a chancery enrolment of the letters patent,<sup>18</sup> or of the original issued to Cabot, explains why the privy seal warrant of December 1497 has long been the chief historical source relating to the pension grant.

Whilst the delay between Cabot's return and the grant of the pension can be readily explained, the six-week interval between the signet letter and the delivery of the warrant into chancery is less easy to understand. Chancery was always open; and Everard Digby's warrant for a pension, granted only a day after Cabot's, was delivered into chancery on 18 December 1497, a gap of just four days. Similarly, a privy seal for a licence to elect, dated 29 December, was delivered into chancery 2 January 1498.<sup>19</sup> In Cabot's case it is possible that he deferred matters simply because he did not have the funds to pay the considerable charges required for the drawing-up of the letters patent.<sup>20</sup> Other factors may have included a lack of familiarity with the procedures involved and / or a desire, once he had received the initial letter(s), to return to Bristol so that he could spend Christmas with his family. Significant delays between the original grant and the later letters patent were not, at any rate, unheard of. For instance, Richard Arnet of Taunton was awarded an annuity of 40 shillings a year on 8 October 1497, probably either for information concerning the flight of Perkin Warbeck, or for contributing to his capture at Beaulieu. Arnet's privy seal, recording an initial grant made at Exeter on 8 October 1497, was not delivered into chancery until 12 February 1498.<sup>21</sup>

Turning from bureaucratic process to the content of the letter, one thing that will be immediately obvious to the reader is the spelling of John Cabot's name. Properly Caboto or Chabotto in its Italian forms, his surname was variously rendered by English clerks, although

<sup>15</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p. 218. Confirmation that the letters patent were issued is also found in the so-called 'Cabot roll' – a contemporary abstract of the accounts of the Bristol customers 1496-1499, which records two full-year payments of £20 to Cabot for the exchequer years Michaelmas 1497-1498 and 1498-1499: Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, p. 219; E. Scott and A. E. Hudd (eds.), *The Cabot Roll: The Customs Roll of the Port of Bristol, A.D. 1496 to 1499* (Bristol, 1897).

<sup>16</sup> Jenkinson, *Great Seal*, pp. 362-66. Similarly James Foise, granted a pension of £20 on 2 December, did not seek enrolment; and the same is true of the licence to elect cited below: TNA:PRO, C82/171 2 and 29 December.

<sup>17</sup> The grant to John Cabot would have been classed as a charter 'of the little fee': its engrossment (writing) on to parchment and sealing would have cost him a minimum of 18s 4d, including 12d (one shilling) for the sealing wax: Jenkinson, *Great Seal*, p. 332. The true costs would have been greater than this, since each official involved would have demanded his own fee, and there is no indication that Cabot had been excused payment. He would also have had to pay fees to the privy seal clerks for the earlier warrant transcribed here. Enrolment of the patent would have incurred a yet further cost.

<sup>18</sup> It is not on the relevant patent roll, TNA:PRO, C66/581.

<sup>19</sup> TNA:PRO, C82/171. Most other grants on this file took less than a week from initial grant to delivery into chancery: and although five made after 17 December 1497 were not delivered into chancery until January 1498 they were still delivered before Cabot's grant.

<sup>20</sup> For a mid-sixteenth century account of costs see Jenkinson, *Great Seal*, pp. 340-1: although not all the costs enumerated will have applied to Cabot, since his was a less elaborate affair.

<sup>21</sup> TNA:PRO, C82/169; E101/414/6, fo. 90v. In this instance both distance and lack of funds may explain the delay. Like Cabot, Arnet was to receive his payment from local customs officers.

his Christian name was always correctly anglicised as 'John'.<sup>22</sup> Here the explorer's name is given as 'John Calbot'.

Grants such as that outlined in this privy seal frequently give some indication of the status and/or place of residence of the person receiving the gift or privilege.<sup>23</sup> In this warrant, Cabot is described as 'of the parties of Venice'. Whilst his birthplace is a matter for debate, John Cabot owned property both in the city of Venice and in the port of Chioggia, which was a part of the city-state, and he was naturalised as a Venetian citizen at some time between November 1471 and July 1473.<sup>24</sup> In the conventions of the time, the document thus describes him as a Venetian.

Little can be read into the immediate preamble to the award. The underlying reason for the king's action is almost never specified in a formal grant.<sup>25</sup> For 'certain considerations us specially moving' was one of a number of stock phrases traditionally used to convey the king's wishes, and would have been instantly recognised by the clerks of chancery who were to draw up Cabot's letters patent. The failure to say why the pension was being granted is thus not significant.

The grant to Cabot was made 'during pleasure', rather than for life, and could potentially be withdrawn. The same restriction was placed on the pensions awarded to two Azoreans, Francisco Fernandes and João Gonsalves in 1502, and to John's son, Sebastian, in 1505, when they were rewarded for their respective voyages of exploration.<sup>26</sup> But it was a restriction placed also on, for example, six of the eleven annuities enrolled on the patent rolls in the seven regnal years 1494/5–1500/1. This was despite the fact that, unlike the two Cabots and the Azoreans, the recipients in these cases were the king's natural born subjects.<sup>27</sup> John Cabot's treatment in this respect was thus not unusual. It did mean, however, that his continued financial support depended on him retaining the king's favour.

Cabot was to be paid £20 a year by the customers of Bristol from revenues collected by them in the port. This was about four times what a common labourer might expect to earn in a year.<sup>28</sup> The explorer thus had sufficient funds to support himself and his family in comfort, but not enough to allow him to invest in the voyages in any meaningful way. The customers of Bristol were, for the remainder of Cabot's life, Richard Ameryk and Arthur Kemys. In the event, John Cabot seems to have difficulty in obtaining payment from them, for they allegedly claimed to have insufficient warrant for paying out the monies. The result was that a further privy seal, addressed to the treasurer and chamberlains of the exchequer and dated 22 February 1498, was issued to confirm the king's grant and order that it should be put into effect.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> His only known signature, on a Venetian document of 1484, gives the form 'Chabotto' and the Venetian form 'Zuan' for his christian name: E. Giuffrida, 'New Documents on Giovanni Caboto', *Attreversarre gli Oceani*, ed. R. M. Zorzi (Venice, 1999), p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> Both at the time, and in later historiography, the term 'privy seal' could refer to either a royal order authenticated with the privy seal, or to the impression of the seal that authenticated the document. It is used in both senses in this introduction and in the notes to the document: the notes make it clear where the seal, itself, rather than the document so sealed, is intended.

<sup>24</sup> Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 33-34, 38, 192-195; Guiffreda, 'New Documents', pp. 61-65.

<sup>25</sup> One of the few exceptions to this rule are the pensions and offices granted to those who served the king on his 'victorious journey' [of 1485]. For examples see W. Campbell (ed.), *Materials for a History of the Reign of Henry VII* (2 vols., London, 1873-77), *passim*.

<sup>26</sup> For the Azoreans, see: Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 248-9; for Sebastian, A. A. Ruddock, 'The reputation of Sebastian Cabot', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xlii (1974), p. 99. In both instances writs addressed to the treasurer and chamberlains of the exchequer expressed more fully the reason for the grant.

<sup>27</sup> *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1494-1509*, pp. 5, 9, 13, 60, 96, 110, 122, 125, 133, 134.

<sup>28</sup> E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, 'Seven centuries of building wages', *Economica*, vol. 22 (1955), p. 197.

<sup>29</sup> Condon and Jones, 'Warrant for the payment of John Cabot's pension.'

**Transcription of the privy seal warrant**

*Memorandum quod xxviii die Januarij Anno subscripto istud breve liberatum fuit domino Cancellario Anglie apud Westmonasterium exequendum.*<sup>30</sup>

**Henry** by the grace of god king of England and of ffraunce and lord of Irland To the most reuerend fadre in god John Cardinal archiebisshoppe of Cantrebury prymate of all England and of the apostolique see legate our Chaunceller greting<sup>31</sup> We late you wite<sup>32</sup> that We for certaine consideracions us specially moevying haue yeuen<sup>33</sup> and graunted unto our welbiloued John Calbot of the parties of Venice<sup>34</sup> an annuitie or annuel rent of twenty poundes sterlinges To be had and yerely perceyued [from the fest o]f<sup>35</sup> thannunciacion of our lady last passed<sup>36</sup> during our pleaur<sup>37</sup> of our custumes and subsidies commying and growing in our poort of Bristowe by thandes of our customers<sup>38</sup> ther for the tyme beyng at michelmas<sup>39</sup> and Estre<sup>40</sup> by even

<sup>30</sup> This Latin subscription was added in a chancery hand on delivery of the writ, and records the delivery of the warrant into chancery [lit: to the lord chancellor] at Westminster on 28 January 1498 in order that it should be performed: that is, that letters patent should be drawn up and issued to John Cabot [Calbot]. A marginal but hieroglyphic 'R', just visible on the left-hand side of the photograph, likewise indicates receipt of the writ in chancery, and appears to be a fore-runner of the later 'Recepi' clause [I have received], for which see Jenkinson, *The Great Seal*, pp. 263-65.

<sup>31</sup> John Morton: created chancellor 6 March 1486, archbishop of Canterbury 6 October 1486 and cardinal priest of St Anastasia 20 September 1493.

<sup>32</sup> 'We late you wite': We let you wit – i.e. this letter is to let you know that ...

<sup>33</sup> 'yeuen': yeven – i.e. given.

<sup>34</sup> 'of the parties of Venice' – i.e. that he was seen as a resident of the city-state of Venice, a region that included not only the city but also the port of Chioggia, where Cabot owned property: Williamson, *Cabot Voyages*, pp. 38, 192-95.

<sup>35</sup> Legible but damaged by the slit for the seal tag.

<sup>36</sup> 'thannunciacion of our lady': the annunciation of our lady [the Virgin Mary] – i.e. from 25 March 1497.

<sup>37</sup> 'during our pleaur': during our pleasure – i.e. continued payment was at the will of the king. Since it is not clear whether the upstroke at the end of the final 'r' is merely a flourish or represents a missing 'e', the stroke has been noted here simply as an apostrophe and not extended.

<sup>38</sup> In other words, payment was to be made by the customers / collectors at Bristol from the customs revenue collected there on overseas trade.

<sup>39</sup> Michaelmas: the Feast of St Michael the Archangel, observed on 29 September.

porcions Wherfor we wol<sup>41</sup> and charge you that under our grete seal ye do [make]<sup>42</sup> heruppon  
our *lettres patentes* in god<sup>43</sup> and effectuell *fourme* **Yeuen** undre our Pryue Seal<sup>44</sup> at *our* paloyes  
of Westminster the xiiij<sup>th</sup> day of Decembre The xiiij<sup>th</sup> yere of our Reigne. / <sup>45</sup>

Horwod<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Michaelmas and Easter were the two principal divisions of the exchequer year. Whereas Michaelmas was fixed, the date of Easter was determined by the lunar cycle so that the outside dates of the two accounting terms of Michaelmas (which included Hilary term) and Easter (which included Trinity) could vary by up to five weeks from year to year.

<sup>41</sup> 'wol': will.

<sup>42</sup> Legible but damaged by the slit for the seal tag.

<sup>43</sup> 'god': good.

<sup>44</sup> This formulaic closing clause indicates that the document was sealed and given authority by the king's privy seal. The marks of the outline of the seal, which sealed the folded document 'close', concealing its contents from casual inspection, appear on the reverse of the warrant. The seal wax will have been recovered in chancery and melted down for re-use. Unlike the great seal, the privy seal was a single-sided seal that could be applied direct to the document. The wax would have adhered to the slightly rough 'hair side' of the reverse of the warrant, which was written on parchment, the (treated) skin of a sheep. The main text was written on the smoother 'white' or flesh side. For an image of an impression of the privy seal, which was attached to Henry VII's will (but is now damaged), S. B. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (London, 1972), Plate 7(a). The reader should note that the captions to 7(a) and 7(b) have been reversed. 7(b) is the double-sided great seal, which will have been suspended from Cabot's letters patent, giving it its formal authority.

<sup>45</sup> 13 December 1497.

<sup>46</sup> The official signature of John Horwood, one of the clerks of the privy seal: R. Horrox and P. W. Hammond (eds.), *British Library Harleian Manuscript 433*, ed. (4 vols, Gloucester, 1982), vol. 2, p.190.

Photograph of the privy seal warrant: reproduced by permission of The National Archives, UK

